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U.S. role in Nicaragua revives issue of secret war

By James McCartney
Inquirer Washington Bureau

WASHINGTON — President Reagan's supporters depict the United States as a pitiful, helpless giant in Central America, trying to fight communist treachery, as one says, "with one hand tied behind its back."

That is what will happen, they say, if Congress cuts off money to support a secret war against the leftist Sandinista government in Nicaragua.

But Reagan's opponents say the issue in the congressional debate over Nicaragua is quite different. They ask: "Can — or should — a democratic society try to fight a controversial, covert war?"

In fact, the debate has raised unresolved issues about presidential powers and secret wars that have haunted the nation since the tragedy at the Bay of Pigs in Cuba in 1961.

Ray Cline, former head of intelligence for the State Department, has argued that President Reagan should be able to wage a secret war against the Sandinistas, and other intelligence specialists have agreed.

"The Soviets and Cubans operate secret wars," Cline said. "We have to be able to counter them at their own game, with the only kinds of methods that will work."

But former CIA Director Stansfield Turner disagreed. It was, he has written, a mistake for the CIA to get involved in Nicaragua.

Turner has argued that the lessons of modern history, in an age of instant communication, prove that a democratic society cannot engage in covert intelligence operations that might be politically controversial be-

cause they inevitably will be exposed and thus will backfire.

He added that some covert activities might be justified because they would have broad public support if exposed, "but the Nicaragua operation is not one of them."

The congressional debate over covert action in Nicaragua goes far beyond the question of whether Reagan violated the law by secretly supporting anti-Sandinista guerrillas — the issue initially raised by members of the House Intelligence Committee.

Many in Congress — mostly Democrats, but also a few Republicans — are challenging Reagan's hard-line policies in Central America. They also question whether his presidential powers should be restricted.

And they are raising basic questions about covert action by the CIA. Such questions have torn the agency apart with internal power struggles recently and threaten to do so again. Congressional critics do not want to rule out covert intelligence activities, but would sharply restrict them.

The congressional move to cut off aid to the Nicaraguan rebels has been cast in terms of preventing the Reagan administration from violating the law. Beneath the surface, it has been much more than that.

In a party-line vote, the House Intelligence Committee, which is controlled by Democrats, approved a resolution Tuesday "to prohibit United States support for military or paramilitary operations in Nicaragua."

The narrow argument was that Reagan had ignored a congressional mandate of last December forbidding U.S. support for efforts to overthrow the Sandinista government.

But members of the House committee did not talk of legalities. They discussed the resolution in terms of opposition to Reagan's overall Central American policies.

Committee Chairman Edward Boland (D., Mass.) said Reagan's secret support had become counterproductive, meaning that the United States was making enemies by underwriting a secret army.

Fundamentally, the Democrats believe that Reagan is trying to win militarily in Central America be-

cause he sees the struggle primarily in military terms. They are seeking negotiations.

The Senate Intelligence Committee, however, which is controlled by Republicans, voted Friday to permit continuance of covert support for Nicaraguan rebels at least until the end of September, leaving the fate of Reagan's program up in the air.

The committee also demanded a report by the end of September on Reagan's objectives in Central America.

Reagan cast the argument in military terms in an interview with White House correspondents Wednesday. He pictured the Nicaraguan rebels as "freedom fighters" and argued that the United States must support those who oppose dictatorial leftist regimes.

The debate over covert support of warfare in Central America also centers on whether the President should do what he thinks is necessary if he believes the nation's security is at stake.

The clearest statement of Reagan's attitude on this question came two weeks ago from White House counselor Edwin Meese 3d, who told reporters: "It is the responsibility of the president to conduct foreign policy. Limitations on that by Congress are improper, as far as I'm concerned."

Reagan has taken the same position. He said in his April 27 speech to a joint session of Congress that "the national security of all the Americas is at stake in Central America." And he said Wednesday that the House was seeking to take away "the ability of the executive branch to carry out its constitutional responsibilities."

To Reagan, the issue is whether he can do his job as he thinks it needs to be done. In the background is the question of the role of covert action by the CIA, which, through most of its history, has operated without public or congressional scrutiny.

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